

## **The U.S. Army's Role in Disaster Assistance**

Disaster strikes: a hurricane makes landfall within reach of your post, a tornado touches down within miles, flooding endangers a nearby community. Can you help? Your trained, proactive military mentality prompts you to rally your resources, run to the front, assess the situation, and take action. Not so fast. Under limited circumstances, military commanders may take immediate in response to assist local communities when disaster strikes their communities. According to federal law however, that authority is applicable for only about the first 72 hours.

What if the community floods on Sunday and the commander gets a phone call from a town councilman on Wednesday asking if he can supply some trucks to help clear debris? According to the National Response Plan now being finalized within the Homeland Defense Department, military personnel and equipment will only be used after local, state, and other federal entities have been consulted. The commander will probably have to tell the local officials he cannot help until the request is routed through state and federal channels.

It might sound strange at first but keep in mind that the mission of the Department of Defense (DOD) and the US Army is to fight and win the nation's wars. The personnel and equipment for that fight must remain ready and serviceable when called for war. In the big picture, government planners have to ensure they use domestic resources before they ask DOD to lend a hand.

Military assistance to civil authorities is very limited under the law. In fact, the guiding principle is completely opposite to the military mentality. Whereas a proactive, motivated soldier stands ready to be the first in, take charge and stay through the bitter end, in civil disaster assistance soldiers will be last in, first out, and will take charge only in very narrow, limited circumstances.

Under current doctrine, taskings for military assistance will go through a presidentially appointed Federal Coordinating Officer to a Defense Coordinating Officer (DCO) (assigned by First Army in Atlanta, GA). The DCO must request support through First Army which relays the request to FORSCOM, which talks to NORTHCOM which will have the tasking approved by the Joint Director of Military Assistance in the Pentagon. While it sounds cumbersome, it is a necessary mechanism for military leaders to ensure they balance readiness requirements with assistance to civil authorities.

When the weather or other natural disaster becomes the enemy that threatens our safety or property, it is a foreign notion that we, as soldiers, are supposed to rely on someone else to lead the fight. But, under the law, the first responsibility goes to local authorities, then to state entities and only after they have expended all resources will the federal government and finally DOD be brought in to assist. Obviously, in a major disaster this can all happen very quickly; but, if flooding or other calamity strikes your community and you are wondering why all the units on post are not called out to assist, trust that the decision makers with an eye on the big picture are ensuring we keep our primary mission in mind at all times.

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